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The Emergent Role of Design as a Mediating Force in Socio-cultural Transformation

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Abstract

This paper considers the role of the designer as a mediator in planning and policy delivery. It discusses the implications for a definition of design arising from a doctoral research project that examines design's contribution to community development.

Design continues to expand into new territories of practice, seeking to reframe its purpose as a catalyst for organisational innovation and systemic transformation. Fry (2009) describes the potential of design as a “*pathfinding means to sustain action countering the unsustainable while also creating more viable futures.*” Co-design, service design and transformation design are terms that describe new approaches within design that have been applied to complex social issues such as health, inequality, crime and social exclusion (Lee, Y., Cassim, J. 2009). However, support of action on such issues has largely been explored through the use of creative methods applied through the design process. If design is to effectively assist sustained and meaningful transformation, it must develop an understanding of practice suited to social organisation. This paper asserts that if design is to realise its potential as a catalyst for behavioural change, cultural re-orientation and social innovation then it is crucial to first re-design design.

The paper discusses findings from a field case study conducted in Clackmannanshire, a region of Central Scotland. Local community planning objectives on issues related to health and wellbeing was used as an anchor from which to navigate beyond conventional boundaries and explore actions. In essence: the project was rooted in a real-world policy context, but unconstrained in its methods or scope. The objectives were two-fold: to understand issues relating to effective planning and delivery, and to recognise the transferable attributes of design practice in such a context. The paper argues that an effective design intervention must focus less on the objective of problem solving and more on mediation as a method for design in its new age.

Conceptualising design practice with social mediation at its core has profound implications for the required skills of the design practitioner. It therefore seems reasonable that engagement with new challenges and contexts of practice will require fresh approaches to education and training. The paper concludes by identifying some policy implications for design education and practice.

The Need for Change

By the turn of the 20th Century the industrialisation had transformed our collective values, economic growth, facilitated by technological innovation and mass communication became the dominant measure of progress. Egalitarian concepts of democracy were pursued through the production of utilities. At the turn of the 21st Century the banking crisis, environmental degradation and widening inequality are all symptomatic of the need for a deep reassessment of our current values. It is now widely acknowledged that action must be taken. The values, which drove industrialisation, enjoyed a mutually reinforcing relationship with the emergence of design as a profession in the first half of the 20th Century. This paper will explore contemporary issues of understanding in relation to transformative objectives and their relevance to design.

Humberto Maturana (1997) argued that in contemporary culture our constructed reality is dominated by two permeating ideologies, “the market justifies everything, “and progress is the value that transcends human existence.” The dominant problem therefore appears to be one of understanding what action should be taken; realised and meaningful transformation will require new ways of seeing. Political theorist, Hannah Arendt described previous attempts to break with modern structures of thought as unsuccessful (Arendt, H. 2000), reasoning that in the reassessment of value and hierarchies, conceptual frameworks have largely remained intact. It seems therefore that transformation will require us to transcend prevailing structures of thought in looking to new solutions.

Realised and meaningful transformation will require participation from everyone (Manzini, E. 1998., Papanek.V. 2001). Furthermore, it will require an uptake of individual and collective responsibility across every area of society (Papanek, V. 2001). However, it is widely observed that current policy and planning frameworks do not adequately support opportunities for social innovation (Boyle, D. 2010, Spratt, S. et al. 2010). Sustainable development is now a commonly referenced concept; concerned with the balance of social, economic and environmental agendas the aim is to “*meet the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.*” (Brundtland, G. H. 1987) The current political definition of sustainable development derives from the Brundtland Report (1987). Submitted to the United Nations Environmental Programme in 1983, the report sought to address accelerating environmental degradation and increasing social inequality through sustainable growth. In doing so it expanded the ecological concept of sustainable development to encompass social and economic considerations. It acknowledged that while there were threshold limits with regard to the consumption of resources, economic growth could co-exist with environmental interests: “*Growth is absolutely necessary to overcome mass poverty ... how else without growth, can we hope to cope?.. if they are to escape the poverty trap.*” (Brundtland, G. H. 1987)

It therefore did little to subvert the dominant ideologies of New Welfare Economics, implemented in the 1930's that an increase on collective wellbeing relied on an increase in Gross National Product. These principles are still prevalent in European policymaking, the Europe 2020 Strategy, (2010) reviewed Europe's progress in relation to the Lisbon Agenda post-economic crisis. In address of structural weaknesses exposed by the economic crisis it focuses on sustainable recovery as a prerequisite to sustainable growth. Greater investment in R&D and innovation, increased use of ICT and a more dynamic business environment are outlined as the means to address the '*productivity gap*' which has widened between Europe and its main global economic partners. Technological innovation applied within an industrial economic framework is still pursued as the dominant model of progress.

Homer-Dixon (2000) asserts that healthy societies require a balance of both social and technical ingenuity through an iterative of relationship of positive and negative feedback. While principles of subsidiary action are applied in theory at the highest levels of policy, the practical application does not currently deliver (Spratt, S. 2010). In a competitive culture which focuses on rapid technological innovation social ingenuity can fail to keep up, when this happens an '*ingenuity gap*' forms (Homer-Dixon, T. 2000). The revaluation of our current value systems and hierarchies will require greater clarity at a policy level on the realistic interrelation and prioritisation of social economic and environmental objectives (Orr, D. 2002, Spratt, S et al. 2010).

The Design of Transformation... or the Transformation of Design

The need to assess the relationship between technology, the environment and social capacity for action has had profound implications for design. The potential of human '*resources*', '*research*' and '*intelligence*' have not yet been sufficiently realised (Manzini, E. 1998., Homer-Dixon, T. 2000). The increasing address of ecological and social issues concerned with equity and wellbeing (Sangiorgi, D. 2010) considered in conjunction with Manzini's (1998) proposal of community products, such as, washing centres and collective kitchens represents perhaps one of the most significant shifts in contemporary design practice. While concepts such as cooperative washing centres may not be new (Manzini, E., Jegou, F. 2003) their application in the mainstream represent a dramatically different forms of social organisation.

While community products look to service solutions for collective use, their practical realisation re-frames application re-centres social design objectives beyond products and services, to crafting conditions for change. Victor Margolin (2000) describes two distinct functions of design research, the first being the practical knowledge required in the creation of commodities, and which commodities may be created. The other is to understand the application of these commodities and their subsequent social function. However, "*if we are to move the question of what is to be designed outside the confines of market driven concerns, then we need new ways of understanding better the relation of design to the satisfaction of human purposes.*" (Margolin, V. 2000. P.4)

If design has a role to play in effecting true socio-cultural and socio-political transformation a deeper understanding of what that role may be and the principles of

practice which inform it is required (McKee, L., Press. M. 2009). With the emergence of service design as a recognised discipline in the 1990s services were initially seen as products. This view evolved to the perception of services as complex, '*relational entities*' (Sangiorgi, D. 2010). While products may be produced in process, it makes a transition from a systemic view of services grounded in conventional objectives of product creation to one of navigating relationships. It acknowledges that solutions can never be fully realised or controlled by the designer (Sangiorgi, D. 2010., Findelli, A 2001). Sangiorgi (2010) explains that in recent years this view has evolved further and services are no longer conceived as *ends in themselves*, but are increasingly considered as an engine for wider societal transformations.

New Design Spaces

As social design objectives increasingly aim to push beyond conventional boundaries in the navigation of everyday life, the scope expands beyond focused service interventions to multi-organisational systems perspectives. The Southwark Circle (2008) project carried out by Participle to address issues relating to an ageing population in the U.K places an emphasis on social equity and regional development. Reframing dominant design objectives from economic to social concerns will require the development of new ways through which design can navigate higher levels of complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty (Margolin, V. 2000). In doing so it must find ways to transcend the confines of process, economic objectives and its relationship with commodities (Fry, T. 2008) and to reflect back in identifying which attributes are transferable.

New Design Spaces was a field case study conducted in Clackmannanshire, Central Scotland between September 2009 and November 2010. The study sought to explore possible applications of design in crafting conditions for mindful transformation. The study was grounded in a context of regional planning and policy development as a mechanism through which to take a meta perspective of design and better understand the requirements of design practice suited to processes of social organisation. It involved collaboration between Clackmannanshire's community planning partnership (the Clackmannanshire Alliance), the University of Dundee Master of Design and Fine Art students, local organisations and residents.

Community planning processes are now a primary vehicle for regional planning and policy delivery in the U.K. The operational aims are to make sure '*people and communities are genuinely engaged in the decisions made on public services which affect them*' and for '*organisations to work together, not apart, in providing better public services.*' (Scotland. 2003) Strategic plans, known as Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs) were outlined by each Scottish local authority in 2008 to reduce inequalities and boost sustainable growth. Action was to be delivered through local community planning partnerships and financed until 2011 by the Fairer Scotland Fund.

New Design Spaces explored issues affecting cohesive regional service development relative to objectives of the Clackmannanshire Alliance. The methodological approach was emergent throughout and developed responsively to insights as they surfaced through research. Objectives were therefore left deliberately open at the outset. The study involved,

- A one month **residency** to obtain an organisational, socio-cultural and socio-political understanding of the region
- Supervision of a **practice-led design project**, *Co-creating Change* with Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, Master of Design and Fine Art students to explore local social needs through the application of creative research methods.
- A **multi-organisational workshop** to identify the strengths and weaknesses in current service provision and opportunities for core service development.

A rural region of only 490,000, industrial decline has had a profound impact on Clackmannanshire. Poor transport links and relative geographic isolation has exasperated issues of intergenerational unemployment and poverty. In 2008, 23.6% of Clackmannanshire's population lived in one of the 15% most income deprived areas in Scotland. Pockets of extreme poverty co-exist with areas of notable wealth, inequality is polarising through the regions development as a commuter belt. Since 2008 transport links to the area have seen significant improvement, creating opportunities with regard to tourism and inward business investment.

The residency took place across January and February 2010. Organisational engagement, interaction with local residents and experiential insights provided a comprehensive understanding of the official and unofficial picture of Clackmannanshire. Immediate objectives were to meet as many organisational stakeholders in the community planning process as possible to get to know the structural, organisational and laterally the hierarchical landscape. Beginning the study without tangible objectives or a clear purpose initially presented challenges in communicating expectations and objectives. At times the complexity of the organisational landscape was overwhelming. As a designer the absence of a visual understanding presented a challenge.

Findelli (2001) explains a structure of design process in the address of organisational change, in contrast to the dominant model of process the start point; instead of being a problem or need is simply a *state*. The end point, as opposed to a solution is also a *state*. In this situation the designer is situated within the process alongside the *user*. The lack of a predetermined direction made nothing, yet at the same time everything relevant. While many people could sketch or verbally outline their own organisational or departmental parameters and closest partnership connections, there was no big picture from which to work. This raised the question of how, and if design could support cohesion in the planning process, by making tangible the interrelations between organisations?

In the delivery of planning objectives, it emerged that council officials concerned with streamlining national policy objectives into the planning framework, rarely saw the impact of delivery in the communities. This insight illustrated the need for greater feedback and between local people, front-line workers and decision makers.

Initial consideration was given to methods of visualisation at a systems level to support understanding. However, mapping organisational and qualitative data at a regional scale involved unmanageable levels of complexity, real depth or qualitative understanding was lost depending on how the problem was re-centred. Visual representations of the landscape would only attempt to fix meaning and thus the fluid,

adaptive nature of social organisation rendered it impractical as a long-term planning tool. The challenge became one of defining the scope.

The complexity of actual needs in contrast to assumed needs and the complex factors and variables that must be taken into account in multi-organisational service provision required a deep level of understanding. The first priority therefore was to define realistic parameters and acquire an understanding of action based on those needs. Recent research demonstrated that health and social issues increase with relative levels of inequality. This holds across national, regional and neighbourhood scales (Wilkinson, R., Pickett, K. 2009). The thematic framework for delivery of community planning objectives in Clackmannanshire encompasses four overarching areas; health improvement, positive image, substance misuse and employability.

The majority of Fairer Scotland Funding has been invested in employability with a focus on skills and training, more than double that which was invested in health improvement. Issues related to poor physical and mental health are intrinsically linked with income deprivation (Scotland. 2008). Supporting people in address of complex needs requires variable and flexible pathways of support. This was demonstrated in the organisational structure of Clackmannanshire Healthier Lives (2010), a Fairer Scotland Funded anticipatory healthcare initiative focused on a people-centred approach to improving individual health and wellbeing, *“CHL aims to help people improve their health and employability through assessments and tailored packages of support designed to meet clients’ specific needs.”*

A weak labour market meant that even when people were ready for work there were few employment opportunities; the cyclical relationship between health, wellbeing and income deprivation represents a complex problem to local authorities.

Two questions emerged,

- How might design support the development of a core service infrastructure capable of meeting complex needs and supporting people into employment?
- Can new objectives for economic development and models of job creation surface through a contextual understanding of needs and opportunities?

Throughout the residency, insights were fed back to a group of three Masters of Design and one Fine Art student. They visited Clackmannanshire and met with a senior community learning and development worker and representatives from Clackmannanshire Healthier Lives. In 2010, 30% of adults smoked, significantly worse than the 25% across Scotland as a whole (NHS National Services Scotland. 2010). As a starting point, the students were asked to explore local smoking rates and respond accordingly. The brief was left deliberately open and emphasis was placed on deep research and understanding with no set parameters in relation to outputs.

At the outset the design students found the openness of the brief uncomfortable. Being asked to set their own objectives through research and reflection required them to navigate higher levels of ambiguity than they were used to dealing with. The 2008 Health and Well-being Profile for Clackmannanshire (NHS National Services Scotland. 2007) highlighted that 33.7% of mothers in Clackmannanshire smoked during

pregnancy in comparison to 24% across Scotland. By 2010 this number had fallen slightly to 29.9% in line with national patterns (NHS National Services Scotland. 2010).

Based on these statistics and further conversation with local organisations the students refined their focus to women aged 18-24. To obtain a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding high smoking rates, a temporary photographic studio was set up in an empty retail space on Alloa High Street (Clackmannanshire's largest town). Designed to be playful and informal, the event benefited from the energy of town centre arts initiatives that were already taking place. A press release was issued and information about the event broadcast on local radio.

To prevent the impression of negative stereotyping and to allow for a broad understanding, the studio was open to all, smokers and non-smokers. People were asked to come along and have their portraits professionally taken while discussing their thoughts, perceptions and experiences of smoking. The information obtained was transferred directly into workable personas. 25 people participated; each was given a high quality portrait in return, some of which were later displayed in a public exhibition.



Figure 1 - Photographic studio

The photographic studio (fig1) was followed up with street interviews. As a tool for engaging with people however, the street interviews were less successful. On reflection the students found that people were more evasive and defensive when approached in the street. It emerged that as method of engagement the photographic studio was much more effective in providing a creative, neutral space for conversation.

Boredom, isolation and stress emerged as significant factors contributing to high smoking rates and presented challenges in relation to smoking cessation. In addition

they relied less on conventional methods such as nicotine patches than on networks of support. The information was collated and synthesised in a workshop at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, and examined from different vantage points. In conclusion the students found that a lack of affordable, accessible childcare in Clackmannanshire reinforced problems of social isolation for young mothers. It created barriers of access to a range of opportunities from health services, skills and training, volunteering and employment options.

During the feedback session the viability of new service development in the current economic climate was called into question. The question of how these services would be funded was a primary concern. It emerged that there was no cohesive understanding of how current childcare service provision linked-up across the region in relation to people's needs. The absence of clarity suggested the need to refocus the question to how an understanding of current childcare provision could be obtained. This defined the parameters for a multi-organisational workshop with public, private, third sector organisations and local residents (fig 2). The workshop visually mapped current childcare provision against areas of deprivation and local schools. It explored issues of access and availability in relation to time, geographic location and affordability



Figure 2 - Mapping current childcare service provision

By exploring strengths and weaknesses in current childcare provision visually, participants made linkages across organisational boundaries. Exchange of knowledge and experience contextualised visually provided a basis of shared understanding upon which to identify gaps and opportunities for address in a brainstorming session. Combined experiential knowledge and insight produced a range of possibilities for new service development and service redesign. Key ideas, such as mobile service provision and the utilisation of existing spaces were explored further in conjunction with a variety of financial and organisational frameworks. Possibilities of public private partnerships, business incubation, social enterprises and volunteering opportunities emerged through identification of potential resources for service redesign and new service development in relation to needs.

A number of participants identified possibilities from within their own roles in the area to support future objectives such as exploring contact points and connecting others to the process. The approach taken in the workshop was described as ‘*non-threatening*’, giving everyone the opportunity to contribute. One participant explained that as a local mother she enjoyed sharing her experiences in this environment. Positive feedback was given with regard to both the workshop and the methodological approach of *New Design Spaces* and the possibility of adopting similar methods in the future:

“Approach is essential to engage a wide range of stakeholders. Need to more of this type of event – joint planning.”

“Good approach, inclusive and utilising good community learning and development principles. Need to do more of this.”

Participants identified potential next steps for development:

- To understand the demands for childcare in Clackmannanshire a further mapping of needs would be required
- Incorporate more stakeholders into the discussion to move it forward such as, community, private sector, parents, employability organisations and toddler groups
- Identify opportunities for social enterprise development and include it in social economy action plans
- Explore how childcare initiatives could support people into education and employment
- Research other examples of good practice

Design Mediation

New Design Spaces surfaced a number of insights relevant for address at a policy level. Primarily responsibility for the realisation of transformative objectives through subsidiary social action must begin at the highest levels of the government. Short-term political goals place unrealistic targets on local authorities and finite funding streams place pressure on regional development initiatives to produce quick, measurable results on complex social problems. Ultimately, this deprives community-planning partnerships of the necessary space and time to take realised and meaningful action based on a qualitative understanding of complex factors and variables.

While community planning advocates a more subsidiary approach to policy making, fieldwork in Clackmannanshire demonstrated that in practice without greater support in implementation it would remain tokenistic. As the old gives way to the new a much deeper level of reflexivity and social participation is needed. The flow of both positive and negative feedback will require the development of frameworks capable of supporting this. The current culture of short-termism has reinforced a fear of complexity amongst local authority decision-makers, at many points during the fieldwork this surfaced in a delegation of responsibility to the public. The lack of effective mechanisms capable of navigating increasing levels of socio-cultural complexity and consequent systemic fragmentation has alienated policy makers from those tasked with delivery. Furthermore it has alienated much of the public from the socio-political

system of which they are a part. Pressure to deliver within strict parameters through conventional methods of measurement encourages answerability to the system not to the people who solutions are designed to serve.

Social systems organise through unending, unpredictable processes of iteration and adaption as they respond to changes in their local environment (Wheatley, M. 1996), change within the system will spur a reaction, the consequences of which cannot be predicted. A system cannot be acted upon, only within (Findelli, A. 2001). Working within the system therefore “*it is not the design of a specific structure but rather the conditions that will support the emergence of the necessary structure.*” (Wheatley, M.1996). New Design Spaces highlighted a mediatory role for design practice focused on crafting conditions for social transformation.

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